

Domestic or Sentimental Fiction 1820-1865

Dana Campbell (2010)

Domestic Fiction Bibliography

Definitions

Sometimes referred to as "sentimental fiction" or "woman's fiction," "domestic fiction" refers to a type of novel popular with women readers during the middle of the nineteenth century. The genre began with Catharine Sedgwick's *New-England Tale* (1822) and remained a dominant fictional type until after 1870. It derives in part from the eighteenth-century "sentimental novel" or "novel of sensibility," of which Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771), Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), and one of the earliest American novels, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), written by William Hill Brown but ascribed circa 1860 to Sarah Wentworth Morton (*Feminist Companion to Literature in English* 766), are examples. In their reliance on the inherent goodness of human nature and the power of feelings as a guide to right conduct, these novels were in part a reaction against Calvinistic doctrines that viewed humanity as inherently depraved. According to Nina Baym, who describes the genre in *Woman's Fiction*, the basic plot of woman's fiction involves "the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world At the outset she takes herself very lightly--has no ego, or a damaged one, and looks to the world to coddle and protect herTo some extent her expectations are reasonable--she thinks that her guardians will nurture her But the failure of the world to satisfy either reasonable or unreasonable expectations awakens the heroine to inner possibilities. By the novel's end she has

developed a strong conviction of her own worth as a result of which she does ask much of herself. She can meet her own demands, and, inevitably, the change in herself has changed the world's attitude toward her, so much that was formerly denied her now comes unsought" (Baym 19).



Baym suggests that the story "exists in two parallel versions. In one, the heroine begins as a poor and friendless child. Most frequently an orphan, she sometimes only thinks herself to be one, or has by necessity been separated from her parents for an indefinite time. In the second, the heroine is a pampered heiress who becomes poor and friendless in midadolescence, through the death or financial failure of her legal protectors" (35).

Susan K. Harris has called this "the dominant novelist subgenre of the 1850s and 1860s, the type that Brown called 'sentimental,' Baym 'women's,' and Kelley 'domestic.'"

Characteristics

1. Plot focuses on a heroine who embodies one of two types of exemplar: the angel and the practical woman (Reynolds) who sometimes exist in the same work. Baym says that this heroine is contrasted with the

passive woman (incompetent, cowardly, ignorant; often the heroine's mother is this type) and the "belle," who suffers from a defective education.

2. The heroine struggles for self-mastery, learning the pain of conquering her own passions (Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 172)
3. The heroine learns to balance society's demands for self-denial with her own desire for autonomy, a struggle often addressed in terms of religion.
4. She suffers at the hands of abusers of power before establishing a network of surrogate kin.
5. The plots "repeatedly identify immersion in feeling as one of the great temptations and dangers for a developing woman. They show that feeling must be controlled. . . ." (Baym 25). Frances Cogan notes that the heroines thus undergo a full education within which to realize feminine obligations (*The All-American Girl*).
6. The tales generally end with marriage, usually one of two possible kinds:
 - 1. Reforming the bad or "wild" male, as in Augusta Evans's *St. Elmo* (1867)
 - 2. Marrying the solid male who already meets her qualifications.
 - Examples: Maria Cummins, *The Lamplighter* (1854)
 - Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)
7. The novels may use a "language of tears" that evokes sympathy from the readers.
8. Richard Brodhead (*Cultures of Letters*) sees class as an important issue, as the ideal family or heroine is poised between a lower-class family exemplifying poverty and domestic disorganization and upper-class characters exemplifying an idle, frivolous existence (94). (largely adapted from Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; not all the books listed below fit Baym's definition)

Practitioners

**Catharine Maria
Sedgwick (1789-1867)**

**Caroline Lee (Whiting) Hentz
(1800-1856)**



(Image courtesy of the [Legacy site.](#))

A New-England Tale

(1822)

Redwood (1824)

Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in Massachusetts

(1827; historical romance)

• [volume 1](#)

• [volume 2](#)

Clarence: or, A Tale of Our Times (1830)

The Linwoods: or, Sixty Years Since in America

(1835; historical romance)

Didactic Tales: Home: Scenes and Charactors Illustrating Christian Truth (1835)

Live and Let Live: or, Domestic Service (1837)

Tales and Sketches, Second Series (1844)

Married or Single? (1857)

The Linwoods

• [volume 1](#)

• [volume 2](#)

Maria Jane McIntosh (1803-1878)



(Image courtesy of the [Legacy site.](#))

Linda (1850)

Rena, the Snowbird (1850)

Eoline (1852)

Marcus Warland (1852)

Helen and Arthur (1853)

The Planter's Northern Bride (1854)

Robert Graham (1855; sequel to *Linda*)

Ernest Linwood (1856)

Susan Bogert Warner (1819-1885) (pseudonym: Elizabeth Wetherell)

"Aunt Kitty's Tales"
(juvenile fiction; 1841-1843)

Woman an Enigma (her first woman's fiction; pub. anonymously in 1843)

Two Lives (1846)

Charms and Counter-Charms (1848)

Violet; or The Cross and the Crown (1856)

Two Pictures; or What We Think of Ourselves and What the World Thinks of Us (1863)



The Wide, Wide World (1850)

Queechy (1852)

The Hills of the Shatemuc

(1856; said to have sold 10,000 copies on the first day of publication [Baym 156])

**E. D. E. N. Southworth
(1819-1899)**

**Ann Sophia Winterbotham
Stephens (1810-1886)**

- *Self-Made* (serialized 1863, 1864; published as *Ishmael* and *Self-Raised*, 1876)
- *Shannondale* (serialized 1850; published in book form, 1851)
- *The Discarded Daughter* (serialized 1851, 1852; published 1852)
- *The Curse of Clifton* (serialized 1852; published 1853; her most popular book until *The Hidden Hand*)
- *India (The Pearl of Pearl Island)* (serialized as *Mark Sutherland*,



(Image courtesy of the [Legacy site](#))

- *Mary Derwent (Ladies' Companion*, May-October 1838; romance of Indians and pioneers)
- *Fashion and Famine* (1854)
- *The Old Homestead* (1855; her most popular novel)

- 1853; published 1855)
- *The Lost Heiress* (serialized 1853; published 1854)
- *Miriam the Avenger* (*The Missing Bride, The Fatal Vow*) (serialized 1854; published 1855)
- *Vivia, or the Secret of Power* (serialized 1856; published 1857)
- *The Missing Bride*
- *The Lost Lady of Lone*
- *Ishmael, or In the Depths*
- *The Hidden Hand* (serialized 1859; published in book form 1889)
- *Capitola, the Madcap: Part II of The Hidden Hand*
- *For Woman's Love* (1890)
- *Sybil Brotherton, or The Temptation*

Maria Susanna Cummins (1827-1866)	Caroline Chesebro' (1825-1873)
<i>The Lamplighter</i> (1854; published anonymously; sold 40,000 copies in 2 months) <i>Mabel Vaughan</i> (1857)	<i>Isa, a Pilgrimage</i> (1852) <i>The Children of Light</i> (1853) <i>Getting Along: A Book of Illustrations</i> (<i>Susan, the Fisherman's Daughter; or, Getting Along</i>) (1855) <i>Victoria, or The World</i>

Overcome (1856; historical novel on witchcraft)
Philly and Kit (1856)
Peter Carradine (1863)

Mary Jane Holmes
(1825-1907)

Mary Virginia Hawes
(Terhune)(1830-1922)
(pseudonym: **Marian Harland**)

Tempest and Sunshine
(1854)
The English Orphans
(1855)
Lena Rivers (1856)
Meadow-brook (1857)
Dora Deane; or, the East India Uncle (1859)
The Leighton Homestead
Maggie Miller
Marian Grey (1863)
Mildred
Rosamond, or the Youthful Error
The Rector of St. Mark's Millbank, or, Roger Irving's Ward
Darkness and Daylight: A Novel
Aikenside
Cousin Maude



(Image courtesy of the [Legacy site.](#))

Henry Louis Gates identifies **Harriet Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859) as containing elements of the domestic plot.

Baym says that **Harriet Beecher Stowe** should not be included "because the good women are not engaged in their own cause, either as individuals or in the interest of their sex, but in a cause where their own welfare is not directly involved or may even be endangered. When juxtaposed with woman's fiction, we see Stowe's work as


pursuing a course that sometimes appears to go against the secular and self-fulfilling current of the popular genre, especially in its emphasis on self-sacrifice" (233)

Context and Controversy

In "Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History" (in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* [New York: Oxford U P, 1985]), Jane Tompkins argues for the significance of this form of fiction. Tompkins characterizes the views of such critics as Perry Miller, F. O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase, Harry Levin, R.W.B. Lewis as follows:

Twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority. In this view, sentimental novels written by women in the nineteenth century were responsible for a series of cultural evils whose effects still plague us: the degeneration of American religion from theological rigor to anti-intellectual consumerism, the rationalization of an unjust economic order, the propagation of the debased images of modern mass culture, and the encouragement of self-indulgence and narcissism in literature's most avid readers--women In contrast to male authors like Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, who are celebrated as models of intellectual daring and honesty, these women are generally thought to have traded in false stereotypes, dishing out weak-minded pap to nourish the prejudices of an ill-educated and underemployed female readership. (82-83)

Tompkins opposes this view, arguing that "the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than



any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (83).

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